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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN NGOS QUESTION THEMSELVES AND RESOLVE TO

REFORM

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The GOJ withdrew two highly controversial bills on professional associations and NGOs from Parliament on January 9. Minister of State for Media Affairs Nasser Judeh told the press that the withdrawal reflected "the government's keenness to proceed with political development and comprehensive reform" and promised greater consultation with civil society before proposing a new draft law. Contacts in government, parliament, and civil society could not offer a timeframe for when an alternate proposal would be sent to parliament and challenged whether the alternative might improve from the withdrawn draft or be worse. In light of these zigs and zags, some NGOs question the Jordanian leadership's desire to engage in the type of real political reform they tout to the international community, despite the withdrawal of the regressive legislation. However, senior officials inform us they are committed to redrafting the legislation with USAID's assistance, so that they are stepping forward in Jordan's political development. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Civil society leaders who gathered with embassies for a coffee on January 13 ascribed a number of reasons to the unexpected, but generally appreciated withdrawal of the two civil society-related drafts. Eva Abu Halaweh, a lawyer and director of MIZAN, a legal rights group, claimed that the government's shift was a result of pressure from local activists, foreign embassies and Human Rights Watch's critical December 17 report on freedom of assembly. She suspected that the government withdrew the law to "save face and not embarrass itself further." Other contacts have suggested that the cabinet shift which replaced the previous Minister of Social Development with the more dynamic Hala Latouf (whom civil society considers one of its own), had everything to do with the withdrawal. During a separate January 9 meeting between Prime Minister Nader Dahabi and CODEL Price (septel), Dahabi raised the withdrawal of the draft legislation and tied it to a promised greater engagement with civil society as evidence of his government's commitment to political reform. With regard to the law, the consensus voiced was that the withdrawal was an important first step, but some feared that the government could put a similar or (in their view) less favorable law in its place. And in a nod to the conspiracy theories that fill the street, some activists with whom post spoke linked the withdrawal of the laws with the President's travel to the region in January.

¶3. (SBU) The gathering provided an opportunity for introspection and self-criticism in the civil society community. A majority admitted that they too could use a good dose of reform. NGO leaders chided each other for not being democratically organized, not lobbying parliamentarians, and not making use of public opinion. Mohammad Nasser, of the quasi-governmental but independent National Center for Human Rights, said that civil society is often scared to ask for amendments to laws they perceive as regressive for fear that this will make them worse. Other,

more cynical activists concerned with the pace of reform questioned the government's and even the King's commitment to reform; emboffs reiterated Post's understanding of the commitment of Jordan's leadership to continued reforms.

Skepticism and Cynicism About the Commitment to Reform

¶4. (SBU) Hani Hourani, Director of Al Urdun Al Jadid Research Center, which participated in HRW's December 17 press conference in Amman, said he felt embarrassed to share the stage with HRW while criticizing his country. His organization, however, felt stymied by the government's repeated denial of attempts to hold workshops to train and discuss civil society's role in monitoring the November 20 parliamentary elections. Several times Al Urdun Al Jadid requested permission from the Governorate of Amman to hold these workshops and each time was denied.

¶5. (SBU) Mohammad Al Masri, a democracy researcher at the Center for Strategic Studies, commented that the Jordanian approach to political reform appears to be "top-down", rather than a "bottom-up" approach that might engage and empower civil society. NCHR's Nasser seconded the notion by adding that "true reform has one author - the King." Hourani contrasted the "fancy images" of reform that the country's leadership touts to the world, but says that nobody in Jordan or the international community is "fooled." More directly, Fawzi Samhuri, a jaded Palestinian-Jordanian who has fought for Palestinian rights for nearly three decades, expressed the most cynical reactions of the group, directly questioning the commitment of the government and the King to meaningful political reform.

Activists lack influence with parliament

¶6. (SBU) Civil society leaders were more subdued when describing their relations with and expectations of parliament. Hourani admitted that civil society could do far more in reaching out to parliament. In a telling example, he mentioned that his center would host a civil society-parliamentary workshop the following day which none of the gathered activists had heard of or been invited to. Similarly, an EU-funded, NCHR-sponsored civil society workshop held on January 7 was designed to foster dialogue between the parliament and NGOs - but, unfortunately, all 16 invited MPs failed to attend. Lawyer Ibrahim Al Jazy remarked that while contracting associations advocate for their business interests, Jordanian NGOs rely on foreign governments to do their work.

¶7. (SBU) In contrast to his older, more experienced and more cynical colleagues, Anas Abbadi, President of the National Forum for Youth and Culture described a number of dynamic approaches to linking youth and parliament and efforts to target younger parliamentarians to support his organization's goals. "While we may not want to work with 95% of MPs," he said, "we cannot disregard them." Abbadi described a number of promising organizational and informational efforts using the internet and web tools like Facebook to attract and inform a wider audience of Jordanian civil society.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: The tenor of the dialogue between NGOs has shifted. Six months ago, they complained to the Ambassador that western donors weren't giving them a fair share of the assistance pie. Now, the older generation of activists chirp at one another and the government, casting aspersions and blame for promises of political reform that have yet to materialize. The younger generation seems to have realized that they need to take this bull by the horns and not wait for the government to solicit their opinion. Several of these leaders thanked the embassy for bringing them together, admitting that they don't often collaborate of their own accord. Political differences aside, civil society is clearly frustrated with what they see as the lethargic pace of political reform with government-constructed speed bumps

along the way. Though desperate for the government's partnership and influence, many among Jordan's civil society organizations may be too cynical and untrusting to build their own coalitions and partnerships, and perhaps, to be taken seriously. Meanwhile, in an attempt to bridge the parliament-civil society divide, 32 MPs and 65 Jordanian civil society organizations attended a USAID-grantee sponsored exposition on January 17, more than double the numbers that attended a similar event last year. Attendees told Emboffs that while they appreciated the MPs' presence the real bridges and networks being built were between disparate civil society organizations. END COMMENT.

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